Corporation for National and Community Service
Understanding and Measuring the Value of Social Innovation – Session 1
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015   1–2 p.m.   Renaissance Hotel, Washington, D.C.

IN ATTENDANCE

Participants: 28

Moderators
Pamela Dubitsky, Program Officer, CNCS
Lily Zandniapour, Evaluation Program Manager, CNCS

Small Group Facilitators
Rose Armour, Training Manager, CNCS
Marci Lu, Program Officer, CNCS
Keisha Kersey, Program Officer, CNCS
Parita Patel, Program Officer, CNCS

BACKGROUND

Social innovation is broadly defined as a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective or efficient than previous efforts and that accrues benefit to the whole community. Recent efforts on the part of CNCS to promote social innovation through the SIF have placed primary emphasis on measurement of the effectiveness of specific interventions. However, social innovation occurs within the greater service framework and within the larger community benefit sector. The need for evidence and the desire for innovation present opportunities and challenges to social innovation. This working session invites participants to explore specific themes within this context to chart the path forward.

This working session focused on existing evidence of the contributions of social innovation, the measures and methodologies by which to assess and improve social innovation impacts, and what additional research is needed. Included in this conversation was discussion of understanding value in terms of community impact, impact on intermediary organizations, and impact on social innovators on the ground.

INTRODUCTIONS
- Pamela Dubitsky and Lily Zandniapour introduced themselves to the group. Ms. Zandniapour briefly reviewed the background information on social innovation and goals for the session.
- Ms. Dubitsky explained the format of the session and introduced the four small group facilitators. The participants broke into four groups to discuss challenges and recommendations in four topic areas related to social innovation. Each group's responses are recorded below.

GROUP 1: Finding the balance between evidence and innovation
Facilitator: Rose Armour

The group discussed the challenges related to the need for program evaluation data in order to provide an evidence basis for social innovation. An overarching theme was the need for

definitions in common and shared understanding. Group members made the following recommendations:

- Clearly define what a program is—at what point does it become a program that can be evaluated?
- Expand the definition of "evidence" to think beyond randomized controlled trials (RCTs).
- Allow tiered evidence—an iterative/innovative approach to evidence. Funding is needed at the first iteration level, and it is impossible to create a program with a lot of evidence in the early stages.
- Conduct evaluation as a type of intervention.
- Conduct a feasibility study to determine the type and level of evaluation.
- Cross-sector idea sharing—look at mission-driven businesses that taking innovative approaches in terms of evidence.

GROUP 2: Investing in evidence
Facilitator: Keisha Kersey

The group discussed approaches to investing in evidence, challenges, and recommendations for overcoming those challenges.

How to get started investing in evidence:

- Start with data collection.
- Think about how different partners involved in data collection can be invested in it in a long-term way. How can we add value to data and share it with partners in a way that makes it valuable to them?
- Work to build capacity of different groups starting in different places.

Challenges:

- Organization commitment to work can vary.
- Staff turnover can be an issue in a long-term evaluation.
- It is difficult to keep funders on board.
- Communication between partners can be a challenge.

Recommendations:

- Understand the audiences and their level of sophistication. Prepare communications materials for different audiences that don't contradict each other or provide confusing information.
- Talk more about the costs of impact evaluations to dispel the notion that this evidence is easily obtained.
- Understand the risk aversion of people in these systems. Strategize how to prepare partners for the possibility that the answer is not one that they are expecting. Have a meaningful answer for what comes next.

GROUP 3: Evidence Building in hard-to-measure areas
Facilitator: Marci Lu

The group discussed the opportunities and challenges of conducting evaluations in areas where measurement is difficult and offered their recommendations.

Three types of challenges were identified:
- Data collection and access in rural areas and small communities:
    - Collecting longitudinal data.
    - Program staff turnover.
    - Limited availability of program staff.
- Data and data type:
    - Self-report data.
    - Difficult topic areas present challenges getting at a measurement that deals with the metric.
    - Small n and lack of valid comparison groups.
    - Data are not always separated by gender. This is an issue when studying certain veterans, for example, because the number of woman veterans is small.
- Funders:
    - The funding cycle may not align with what makes sense for measuring impact.
    - Funders may have biases or expectations for what the evaluation will find.

The group offered the following strategies for overcoming these challenges:
- Use a number of measurements to triangulate.
- Maintain good contact information of program participants to ensure they can be reached throughout the longitudinal study.
- Use established literature that can demonstrate effectiveness by proxy. Bridge gaps.
- Connect with the data that other organizations and government agencies are collecting and evaluating.
- Use metrics that make sense for what your program is doing.
- Communicate with funders ahead of time and throughout the evaluation process.
- When training program staff in data collection, communicate the reasons for and importance of the study.
- Ease into evaluation culture.
- Ensure that tools match staff capacity.
- Formalize ways to partner with universities and colleges.

GROUP 4: Leveraging evidence to drive social innovation
Facilitator: Parita Patel

The group discussed some of the challenges of evidence as a driver of social innovation and offered strategies for meeting these challenges:
- Challenges related to language. Multiple funding cycles and parties are involved, and they don't always align well along existing standards of evidence. A standard language is needed in order to ensure understanding and expectations across a number of parties.
- Communication with stakeholders is essential for meeting challenges related to funding:
    - State vs. Federal vs. local funding.
    - Foundation alignment.

        o   Funding cycles.
- Consistency of intervention. Social innovation programs must consider how they deliver the intervention as one of their core services to the community, taking the following considerations into account:
    - Localization: Interventions should allow enough room to work with local parties so that they are invested what is going on.
    - Specification variance testing.
- Outcomes vs. procedural mechanisms. The anticipated outcomes may be at odds with procedural funding mechanisms. It is important to ensure good communication with all parties so that they know what the program/intervention hopes to accomplish.

LARGE GROUP REACTIONS AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS
A common theme that emerged from the group conversations is that evaluations should start by "meeting programs where they are" and codifying the following:
- Core components of the program
- What stage the program is in
- What needs to be in place for data collection
- How evidence is going to be used

Meeting adjourned at 2:00 p.m.

Corporation for National and Community Service
Understanding and Measuring the Value of Social Innovation – Session 2
Summary of Discussion

Wednesday, December 16, 2015   2:15–3:15 p.m.   Renaissance Hotel, Washington, D.C.

IN ATTENDANCE

Participants: 20

Moderators
Pamela Dubitsky, Program Officer, CNCS
Lily Zandniapour, Evaluation Program Manager,
    CNCS

Small Group Facilitators
Rose Armour, Training Manager, CNCS
Marci Lu, Program Officer, CNCS
Keisha Kersey, Program Officer, CNCS
Parita Patel, Program Officer, CNCS

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GROUP 1: Finding the balance between evidence and innovation
Facilitator: Rose Armour

The group discussed the characteristics of what creates a successful balance between evidence and social innovation. Group members identified several challenges and offered recommendations.

What Works:
- To be truly innovative, one must be open to the possibility of failure.
- What is innovation?
  - Innovation is new and creative, addresses an issue, and can be a new approach to implementation or to relationships with intermediaries.
  - Evidence-based vs. evidence informed.
- Balancing levels of evidence and innovations needed to replicate appropriately.
- Innovators must be able to clearly communicate.

Challenges:
- Time vs. pace – there is a sense of urgency to innovation that demands a quick pace, but evidence building takes time.
- There needs to be an acknowledgment of development phase.
- How to still be innovative for continuous improvement and relevance.
- Fear and apprehension of making needed changes.
- How can funders assign points to innovation to help identify good ideas?
  - The funder needs to know the field in order to and know whether something is truly an innovation or whether it already exists elsewhere.

Recommendations:
- Don't fetishize either evidence or innovation.
- Build in time for development in the grant process; a planning year is suggested.
- Build communities of practice that:
  - Are cross-functional.
  - Provide access to tools (such as evidence exchange).
  - Educate during planning year.
- Capacity building around developmental evaluation.
- Knowing the right type of evaluation for where the program is in the process.
- Examples of what "good" looks like.
- Realistic budget expectations and understanding of what it takes to do an RCT vs. an implementation evaluation.

GROUP 2: Investing in evidence
Facilitator: Keisha Kersey

Group 2 combined efforts with Group 4, Leveraging Evidence to Drive Social Innovation and discussed both topics together. Investment, both within the organization and from the perspective of funders, presents challenges that affect the extent to which evidence can be leveraged to drive innovation.

The group emphasized that organizations and their funders must work in concert. The following are some challenges from the perspective of the organization's internal investment:

- Organizations must consider investment in human capital - labor, time, and resources.
- The types of data needed—social vs. economic—drive the sources for obtaining the data and associated costs.
- Infrastructure development requires a great deal of planning and is a long-term investment.
- It is a challenge for organizations to leverage multiple common funding streams and to get "in the know" about them.

Investment in evidence also faces challenges on the funder side:
- Funders want to have evidence that programs are successful, but do not want to pay for evaluation and monitoring systems.
- Funders may only want to evaluate things that are easy to evaluate. If they shy away from things that are difficult to measure, only the innovations that are easy to evaluate will be funded.

Recommendations for investing in evidence:

- Invest in evaluation at the administrative level.
- Prioritize desired learnings.
- Prioritize data collection and evaluation as a percentage of funding.
- Invest in disseminating evidence.

Recommendations for leveraging evidence to drive innovation:

- Draw a distinction between evaluation for learning and evaluation for accountability.
- Understand and communicate when to trust the evidence and make changes.
- Use evaluation to support programs.
- Investing in evidence means investing in change. If the organization is not changing after investing in evidence, that investment is lost.

GROUP 3: Evidence building in hard-to-measure areas
Facilitator: Marci Lu

The group identified the following opportunities to build evidence and strategies for overcoming the challenges of doing so in hard-to-measure areas:
- One area that is difficult to evaluate is social cohesion and lifelong learning in the arts.
    - Arts programs do not traditionally build evaluation into programs.
    - It is difficult to make a causal link between the program and secondary indicators and outcomes.
    - Member development intersects with partner impact.
    - There is no requirement to budget for evaluation in AC grants, therefore there is no funding for it.
- Methodology resources are a challenge especially when an RCT doesn't make sense for evaluating the program.

- o CNCS provides resources in rural areas, but small, rural organizations do not have the capacity to meet the evidence requirements.
  - o One strategy is to bundle together small programs.
  - o Another strategy is to develop toolkits and models to assist small organizations.
- Certain levels of evaluation are not appropriate for all levels of programs.
  - o Reframe the call for evidence to let programs know that there is a continuum and that they are not lacking because they do not have the resources to conduct certain types of evaluations.
  - o Give programs permission to receive recognition from lesser evidence types or quasi-experimental measures.
  - o Consider a positive deviance approach; instead of identifying factors that make things not work, identify those few situations that are beating the odds and study them intensively to see what we can learn.

GROUP 4: Leveraging evidence to drive social innovation
Facilitator: Parita Patel

This discussion was combined with the Group 2 discussion above.

LARGE GROUP REACTIONS AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS
- A common theme of the group discussions was the relationship among what recipients are doing, what researchers are doing, and the expectations of funders. A mutual understanding is needed to make the relationship work.
- Participants emphasized the need for evidence to drive innovation. If programs do not innovate after evaluating, the purpose of evaluation is lost.
- It is important to recognize the difference between program improvement and larger research building in terms of their purpose and evidence building in the field.
- Investment needs to happen on multiple levels; not just on the ground and in day to day operations, but in how to continue to improve in the longer term.
- There is a continuous competition between program funds and evaluation funds. Organizations need to educate their internal staff and grantmakers to make clear that these pots of money are both important and need not be discounted.
- Programs should make evaluation funding part of their "ask" when seeking funding.
- Organizations should ensure that evaluation data is referenced in budget justifications.

Meeting adjourned at 3:15 p.m.